`Stepping away from the computer and into the sweats': The construction and

negotiation of exercise identities in a Norwegian public company

Hilde Rossing[1*] and Robyn L. Jones[1,2]

[1]Department of Coaching and Psychology, Norwegian School of Sport Science, Oslo,

Norway.

[2]Cardiff School of Sport, Cardiff Metropolitan University, Cardiff, Wales.

Abstract

While research has found that a developed exercise identity enables individuals to view exercise participation as self- reinforcing, the social barriers to such exercise identity development and participation have not been fully addressed. The subsequent aim of this study was to explore some of the social complexities at play in terms of how company employees construct and manage their exercise identities within a work place setting. A case-study method was used to address the research issue over a nine-month period. The case to be studied included a sample of 72 employees from a Norwegian public company who participated in an on-going work-based exercise programme called 'Exercise for all'. The principal means of data collection comprised participant observation, individual interviews and exercise logbooks. The data were subject to inductive analysis. The primary barriers to exercise participation included high levels of social comparison in a competitive working context, particularly in relation to 'competent colleagues', and feelings of guilt associated with partaking in 'recreational' activities during work hours. Strategies engaged with to overcome and negotiate such obstacles included justifying participation through a health-related discourse, and constructing a more distinct 'worker-exerciser' identity.

Keywords: case study; exercise; group- based physical activity; identity; workplace

*Corresponding author. Email: hilde.rossing@nih.no

Introduction

In continued efforts to establish and maintain a healthy and productive workforce (Hymel

et al. 2011) while also responding to an intensifying political agenda (Toronto-Charter

2010), an increasing number of companies have developed exercise programmes for their

employees (Robroek *et al.* 2007). Despite the obvious advantages of increased physical

activity on workplace health (Pedersen *et al.* 2009), research indicates that such

programmes' uptake and subsequent impact remains limited (Atlantis *et al.* 2004,

Robroek *et al.* 2007). Indeed, as pointed out by Ziegler (1997) "all the well-intentioned,

beautifully structured programmes in the world will make no difference to workers'

health if too few workers participate" (p. 26). Despite such protestations, relatively little

research has been carried out into social contextual reasons associated with (non)

participation by company employees in established exercise programmes (Robroek *et al.*

2009, Thompson *et al.* 2005).

The work which has been done, however, has increasingly pointed to the salience of an

exercise 'identity` or 'self' in developing and maintaining involvement.

A sociological approach to identity is founded on the notion that a reciprocal

relationship exists between the self and society (Stryker and Burke 2000). Within such

analysis, the concept of identity has traditionally been analysed in terms of social identity

theory, where an individual is associated with a group, or identity theory, where the

association is with a particular role. Within both, however, the self is taken as being

reflexive (McCall and Simmons, 1978). Identity construction then, involves a process of

a negotiation between social roles and environmental expectations, and personal beliefs

(Berger and Luckman 1966). Hence, Dionigi (2002) describes an exercise identity as representing how an individual sees oneself as an exercising being, with participation in exercise groups being strongly linked to individuals' self-esteem as exercising persons (Fox 1997). Such an identity perception is, of course, often formed via interactions with others in particular contexts (Stryker 2002). This was a point echoed by the symbolic interactionalist perspective taken by Stryker (1980), who, positions the self as emerging in and from a social context in which other selves exist.

Despite a growing appreciation for exercise identity as reason for exercise behaviour, Strachan *et al.* (2009, 2010) claim much research within the area has been concerned with a causal link between exercise identity and exercise behaviour. Subsequently, the social context within which people are situated, and how it impacts on exercise identity creation, has been largely neglected (e.g. Vlachopoulos *et al.* 2011). This would appear a considerable shortcoming, considering that the self is acknowledged to be extensively constructed by and through the social context (Stryker 2002). This was a point recently emphasised by McGannon and Spence (2010) in this journal, who argued that social psychology's predominant belief in a divide between self and society has hindered contextual understanding. Similarly, there has been no research on work place exercise identity, despite the apparent clash between the dual identities of being an employee and an exerciser, and its subsequent impact on exercise participation (Johnston and Swanson 2006, 2007). Building an exercise identity at work then, appears to be a far from linear or straightforward process. The subsequent aim of this article was to explore some of the social complexities at play in terms of how company employees construct and manage their exercise identities in a work place setting. More specifically, the

objectives were related to exploring the barriers inherent in developing and maintaining such identities and the subsequent strategies engaged in by individuals to overcome them.

The principal significance of the article lies in exploring the complexities associated with constructing and maintaining exercise identities. This is particularly in terms of the difficulties inherent in negotiating a multitude of social roles and their conflicting expectations and standards (Vrazel *et al.* 2008). For example, a study by Nezlek *et al.* (2007) found the existence of distinct job-related role expectations among working colleagues associated with a desire to demonstrate high competence in all related interactions. For such individuals, being perceived as less competent or seeing others as more competent (Scott 2004) held the potential for subsequent tension and a fear of personal inadequacy in any area important to them. Similarly, Anderson *et al.* (2006) found that a high degree of social comparison existed within groups of working peers; a tendency that inhibited participation in activities where employees felt less competent. Consequently, in many cases, it would appear that people steer clear of confronting the implications of potential divergence between their various identities by avoiding participation in public situations in which they expect to perform weakly (e.g., sporting areas). The value of this article then, relates to exploring both the extent of these and other barriers to exercise participation, and how they can be negotiated and overcome. Better understanding such processes and how they are dealt with holds the future potential not only for more productive and efficient company work-forces, but also more fulfilling and healthier agential lives.

Methodology

Context

The study was located within a public knowledge-production company in Norway. The company comprised 650 employees spread across 9 departments. The nature of the work was generally sedentary and computerized. Nevertheless, the company had a long tradition of offering many formal sport and exercise programmes for its employees. The focus of the current study lay in an ongoing programme termed 'Exercise for all', which was available for employees during normal work hours. The initiative was innovative in many ways. Firstly, unlike the company's employee-driven, after hours 'sports structure', which involved participation in established team sports (within leagues) such as football, bowling and indoor hockey, 'Exercise for all' comprised so- called low-threshold activities, easily accessible activities (such as aerobic step and strength exercises performed to music) aimed at those staff who had little or no previous exercise experience. Secondly, all of the company's employees had access to the 'Exercise for all' programme during work hours as part of a negotiated employment agreement. Thirdly, participation within it was also free of charge as long as individuals committed themselves to an additional hour of exercise a week during their own time. The programme was popular and was now expending to eight exercise groups, with each individual being allowed to enrol in one of the groups for a two semester course over a calendar year.

Methods

Consistent with the aim of the study, an exploratory qualitative methodology was used. Case-study was considered especially suited in this context as it enables the study of action and perception *in situ*, allowing a strong focus on the social construction of the case (Stake 1995). By using a case study design, a detailed contextual and temporal

analysis of a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life was sought (Yin 1984). More

specifically, the principal methods used within the case-study were participant

observation, individual interviews, and weekly exercise logs.

Participants

Of the eight groups in the exercise programme four were selected to partake in the study.

Such a decision was predominantly based on the idea of `purposive sampling` (Patton

2002) which relates to gleaning data from a particular sample that manifest the

phenomenon to be studied (Patton 2002). In this respect the groups were considered

`information rich` cases (Patton 2002), as they consisted of a mixture of individuals who

had never participated, infrequent exercisers and regular exercisers with previous

exercise history. Despite this apparent diversity, it is important to note here, that the vast

majority of the participants were new to exercising at work. The four chosen groups

consisted of 84 employees. However, 12 chose not to participate in the exercise group

leaving 72 participants subject to observation. Of these, six (five females and one male)

agreed to be interviewed about their developing exercise involvement over the year,

giving a total of 11 interviews. In deciding upon the appropriate number to interview, we

were guided by the notion of data 'saturation'. Being aware of Dey's (1999) cautionary

note related to closing inductive categories early, we also felt the need to recognise when

more data became 'counter-productive', where the "newly discovered does not add to the

overall story, theory or framework" (Strauss and Corbin, 1998, p. 136). Such a process

also echoes Hennink's (2011) belief in the need to continuously assess the variations

found in 'new data' in terms of the investigative aim. Finally, in addition to the above

authors, our decision to 'cut' here was also influenced by the lead of Kuzel (1992) and

Guest *et al*. (2006) who tied such judgements as related to data saturation to sample heterogeneity and the research objectives. In addition, 18 participants wrote logbooks via their private company email account. The six interviewees and all logbook contributors came from different departments and had worked for the company from 1-35 years. Again, these informants were similarly subjected to purposive sampling criteria (Patton 2002).

Procedure

The observational work was carried out by the first author over nine months, usually during the hours between midday and 4.30pm, two or three days a week. Here, a written record of observations primarily related to a description and interpretation of events, settings and conversations was meticulously kept (Purdy and Jones 2011). Specific attention was paid to the nature of the social interaction among the participants (e.g., the work colleagues) and between the participants and the instructors, including what was spoken about, by whom, when and how it was said. The observations were primarily conducted within the exercise classes, in the changing rooms before and after each class, and in the hallway which led to and from the exercise rooms, giving a total 300 hours of observations which included around 200 informal field conversations.

As stated, to specifically gather data from their viewpoints, 18 participants agreed to keep personal log-books related to their experiences in their respective exercise groups. After each class, they were sent an email containing several related questions, which they were encouraged to reflect upon. Typical of such questions were; 'how did you experience the group today?' 'Why?' 'Any examples?' 'How did you feel?' 'Why? 'How did you experience the other participants?' And, 'what, if anything, did you talk

about?' Like the observations, where appropriate, the responses here were explored in some depth in the subsequent interviews.

The development of the interview format was guided by a constructivist methodology (Charmaz 2006). Hence, the interviews were conducted as conversations (Esterberg 2002) with each following its own pathway in relation to a basic framework. The framework was centred on such topics as the participants' thoughts on how they came to know about the exercise programme, their initial encounters and experiences of it, their relationships with colleagues, potential barriers to participation, how they tried to negotiate them, their participation in and understanding of the groups, and how they considered themselves as exercising persons. These descriptions developed over the course of subsequent interviews to explore issues such as how their exercise identities were being constructed and maintained, or forsaken in the work-place setting. On average, the interviews lasted about an hour each and took place during or just at the end of the workday, either in the informant's office, in a designated meeting room or other suitable private place (Kvale and Brinkmann 2009). The interviews were also audio-taped and transcribed verbatim.

In terms of a precise procedure, the initial observational data gathered were used to inform subsequent interviews. These were, in turn, analysed with a view to further observations and to focus log-book reflections. The study's design then, comprised a somewhat progressive spiral where a period of observation and log-book reflective entries was followed by interviews which, in turn, sharpened further observations (Hennink 2011). The methods then, were complementary and mutually sustaining, with each informing the next in a developmental sequence. Such a structure ensured a

progressive process of data collection and analysis. Although this set structure, comprising four periods of observations and three of interviews, existed as a guiding procedural framework, the emphasis here remained on flexibility in terms of quality of the data gained.

Data analysis

In line with the unfolding nature of the research design, the data were subject to inductive analysis (Patton 2002). By combining a constant comparative analysis with a line-by-line examination of interviews, field notes and logbooks, common words, phrases, meanings and ways of thinking were identified and constructed as initial codes (Charmaz 2006). What assisted the process here was the importation of the data into MAXQUDA, a qualitative data management and analysis software package. Interpreted repetition from within the raw data set established subsequent patterns and topics that became focused coding categories (Charmaz 2006). The most significant of these focused codes were then used to sift through further field notes, field conversations, log books and interview responses. A final stage of induction involved linking similar categorisations together to generate higher order themes.

A person's story is co constructed between the interviewee, storyteller and socially shared conventions (Atkinson and Delamont 2006). Since narratives are social and researchers commit to interpretivism, a story cannot be regarded as the truth but rather a co construction within a social context (Smith and Sparkes 2009). Subsequently, in order to get as insightful stories as possible the researcher and informants collaborated in (a) trying out possible narrative interpretations of the findings from both observations made and previous conversations, during the interview situation and (b) encouraging

elaboration on meanings and ideas that occurred in the logbooks (Kvale and Brinkmann

2009). During the entire analytical process the second author acted as a `critical friend`

"to encourage reflection on and exploration of alternative explanations and interpretations

as they emerged in relation to the data" (Sparkes and Smith 2002, p. 266). Further, the

prolonged engagement with the research field yielded considerably `thick descriptions`

(Geertz 1973). However, despite the iterative questioning of the respondents, the critical

debriefing sessions, the constant member checking (Guba and Lincoln 1989) and general

reflective process as related to data interpretation (Shenton 2004), as authors, we are

aware that the trustworthiness of the case presented will hinge on the quality of the logic

linking study purpose, data and the conclusion (Wells 2011) and if the tale presented

justifies the interpretations made (Riessman 2008).

Ethics

Approval for the research was obtained from the ethics committee of the host institution.

As part of the ethical process, informed consent was obtained from each participant.

Here, the respondents were apprised about the purposes of the work, the scope of their

involvement within it, guaranteed anonymity during the process and in the dissemination

of results (through the use of pseudonyms). They were also notified that they could leave

the project at any time without explanation or fear of penalty.

Results and discussion

Analysis of the data yielded several principal themes. These included; social comparisons

with `competent colleagues' leading to loss of credibility and stigmatization; viewing

exercise as a 'guilty pastime', justifying participation in terms of injury prevention,

rehabilitation and for enhancing professional productivity, and finally, the construction of

a `worker- exercise` identity. Although each of these themes is discussed individually, they can also be categorized more generally That is, the first two explores the complex problematic barriers evident when struggling to participate within work-site exercise groups, while the latter two describe the strategies used by the employees to negotiate and develop their participation.

Social comparison, 'competent colleagues' and high role expectations

Although `Exercise for all` was a programme intended for those who needed help to get started with exercise, some fitter, more established exercisers also joined in. Subsequently, while the four exercise groups examined did attract employees from the desired target group, they also drew more experienced and regular exercisers, which immediately highlighted a difference in performance. In the words of one of the interviewees;

> I think this group kind of suits me, because I have to start exercising. Still, there are also more well-trained people there. That kind of startles me, and I don't quite understand why they are here. This is not hard training, I don't find it particularly hard, so for those who are well trained, it is not like a hard workout at all (Paige interview, spring 2010).

The beginner respondents then, began to construct negative social comparison or distinctions between themselves and some of the other, more experienced or able, participants. By defining others as more 'fit', the beginner exercisers seemed to marginalize themselves within the larger group. For example, according to one,

> Some years ago I had a membership at a local gym. As I hadn't exercised in years I was
> one of the lesser fit people there, but you know I really did not mind at all, like of course I
> was not as good as the regulars, but in that situation I did not affect me standing in the
> back and seeing the others jump around (Hayley logbook entry, spring 2010)

Although the exercise 'beginners' seemed to somewhat accept their perceived

inadequacies in terms of their general exercise abilities, this acceptance was immediately

challenged when in the context or company of exercising co-workers. Subsequently,

there appeared an apparent contradiction between acknowledging and accepting oneself

as being unfit in one context, while experiencing particular uneasiness when being in an

exercise situation with professional colleagues. As a consequence, one of them described

herself as quite self-conscious about taking part in the exercise group;

> It is a whole different matter and uncomplicated in a fitness club, because I do not have
> relationships with the other participants at all, so no need to worry [if they see me as
> unfit], as their perception of me has no consequence. (Hayley logbook entry, spring 2010)

Such feelings can somewhat be explained by Goffman's notion of 'audience segregation'.

This is because role dilemmas are diverted or not forcibly engaged with if the audiences

before which roles are played out vary. In the words of Goffman, "ordinarily, those

before whom he (sic.) plays out one of his roles will not be the individuals before whom

he plays out another, allowing him to be a different person without discrediting the other"

(Goffman 1967, p. 108). Lacking such segregation, the respondents within this study who

perceived themselves as less competent exercise performers than others, appeared to

suffer from social comparison and contradictory role expectations which were difficult to reconcile. Such anxiety arises when individuals fear an inability to make or maintain a particular impression, and has been identified as a potential barrier to exercise enjoyment and participation (Gammage *et al.* 2004). In other words, although the participants might not find their inept exercising abilities inhibiting outside the work environment, the same shortcoming was perceived as highly embarrassing and risky in terms of their professional credibility when exposed before an audience of colleagues. The feeling of incompetence came into play as the participants reflected on their image in the exercise groups from the others' perspective, and considered how their performances might negatively affect their whole social identity in the workplace. In the words of Hayley and Paige;

> At work, we often have strong differences of opinion, and then we risk meeting each
> other's eyes in the exercise group . . . It feels extra uncomfortable, because I know I can
> easily lose the professional authority I need if I push myself forward in a breathless
> poorly executed exercise (Hayley log book, spring 2010).

> I have no desire to exercise with my closest colleagues [that I interact with everyday]; I
> am a low performer when it comes to exercise and I actually think it would be more
> positive for me to participate in a group where I'm more in the middle, ability wise,
> and not at the bottom (Paige interview, spring 2010).

Such a discovery appears slightly at odds with previous findings that proclaimed social support (from spouse, family, friends, colleagues) as a direct enabler for general exercise

adherence (e.g., Fletcher *et al.* 2008). Rather, the results from the present study indicated that such support was nullified by a fear of demonstrating a lack of competence coupled with the salient perception of the 'generalized other' (Mead 1934) as being more competent than oneself; a perception which somewhat hindered regular participation in the exercise programme. Furthermore, although the general findings here resonate with Festinger's (1954) comparison theory where individuals compare themselves to others in order to reduce uncertainty and gain more accurate self-evaluations, this perception of other participants as being fitter or better at exercise than oneself can be better explained in terms of Scott's concept of `the competent other` (2004, 2005). Although Scott's (2004, 2005) focus was on shyness, results from the current study resonate clearly with her work. In both contexts, not only were individuals worried about momentarily embarrassing themselves through performing ineptly in front of more capable others, but they were also concerned with the consequences of giving a performance that fell below the standard of the 'team' and thus, of being rejected by it (Scott 2005). In this regard, exercise (or lack of it) becomes more of a social and less of an individual-cognitive concern, both in terms of its production and management. Such a view also helps locate face-to-face interaction as a significant shaper of (exercise) identity in relation to the social world (Scott 2007).

In the words of one of the respondents;

> Top-trained, fit looking colleagues in tight trousers can be demotivating. It becomes so obvious and visible that some are much better than you . . . I don't see a nice colleague anymore, when I look at them; it just annoys me as it makes the gap between our performances so visible (Hayley logbook entry, spring 2010).

Being a low ability exerciser within as opposed to outside the programme became crucial to beginner exercises' evaluation of themselves as work colleagues. Hence, developing a perception of low ability in this regard, threatened to spread from exercise to other work identities, with all its related uncertainties (Swann *et al.* 2009). Negotiating an exercise identity within a work context, comprising such distinct role expectations and demands, created an incompatibility within the respondents in terms of desired self-presentation (Goffman 1959). Although Swann *et al.* (2009) did not address exercising employees in his discussion of identity negotiation at work, his `compatibility principle' helps make sense of the current results. The notion that employees need to feel coherence between distinct identities constructed in different settings (e.g., the office and the lunch room) within the overall work context, supports the current findings in terms of the respondents' perceptions of having their work identities and capabilities questioned through demonstrating relative physical incompetence (Swann *et al.* 2009). To not achieve such consistency or convergence held the potential to disrupt mutual expectations, obligations, commitments and the "very nature of relationships themselves" (Swann *et al.* 2009, p.81). The fear existed that poor exercise performance could stigmatize and contaminate their whole professional personas (Goffman 1963). Such a fear of stigmatisation loomed large as a barrier to participation.

What seemed to feed this anxiety was the precise working context, where a culture of high performance and competence dominated. To a certain extent, this echoes previous literature not only where a high degree of social comparison was found among working peers, but that the need for competence stretched far beyond professional duties

(e.g., Nezlek *et al.* 2007). This element of social comparison which was present in the

daily working environment seemed to transfer into the newly formed exercise groups.

Nezlek *et al.* (2007) found job-related role expectations among working colleagues to be

associated with a desire to demonstrate constant high competence in related interactions

within the work-place. The same seemed to apply to the work-place under study. In the

words of Paige and Ben,

> It is a working environment with several . . . well, several highly accomplished people.
> The nature of the work is very competitive. Although we try to be supportive of each
> other in the department...the reality is, there is a lot of pressure on delivering high quality
> on time . . . we live in a world where there is a tight competition for funding in our line of
> work (Paige interview, summer 2010).

> Well, yes we are extremely competitive in this institution, things like high quality, good
> outcomes and such are highly valued (Ben interview, summer 2010).

Consequently, a strong cultural expectation to be a high-achieving professional,

employee existed within the institution. These expectations created a social context of

competitiveness and competence across work related domains, and inevitably impacted

on the willingness of workers to be perceived as 'non competent' in some spheres which,

in turn, influenced participation within the 'Exercise for all' programme.

A guilty pastime

Despite the programme being an official company policy and free to all, participation

appeared to be rooted in a troublesome consideration related to taking time away from a

busy work schedule for perceived 'recreational' purposes. This was a belief echoed by

many, as highlighted in the following log-book and field note extracts:

> In terms of exercising within working hours, I sometimes feel like I am kind of deceiving
>
> the company. It's as if I'm sneaking off [from work]. I know I should absolutely not feel
>
> like this, [particularly as] my boss supports it even though she does not have time to
>
> participate herself, and I truly believe the company experience a win –win situation, but I
>
> do (Susie logbook entry, spring 2010).

> A woman enters the locker room with a big smile and turns towards the other four present
>
> in the room; "Wow, that work out today really made me sweat; I think we all did good". I
>
> join in the conversation. In the developing chat, it emerges that a second woman feels
>
> that other colleagues, who exercise in their spare time, make her feel guilty for exercising
>
> during work hours; "They use every opportunity to comment and point to how this is a
>
> luxury for me". The conversation develops into a justification about why the women
>
> shouldn't feel guilty; while it's obvious they do (field notes, spring 2010).

It appeared then, that taking time off work to exercise was somewhat perceived as a guilt-

ridden activity, equating to carrying out a personal errand during professional time. The

findings here resonate with the work of Dixon (2009), who found that working mothers

would feel a tremendous amount of guilt from partaking in leisure time exercise. While

they acknowledged that exercise was good for them, such women perceived that it should

not be their priority when compared to caring for their children, work or spouses.

However, such feelings of unease among the participants in the current study

were not straightforward or linear. This was because if the participants now ignored the

company's offer of sanctioned, official exercise time, feelings of culpability accompanied these actions too. For example, in words Charlotte;

> "well I tend to feel guilty if I do not show up in class . . . Because I was prioritized for this group, since I have not participated earlier and I do not know if my drop-in kind of participation might affect whether I will be offered the same exercise group next year" (Charlotte interview, winter 2010).

Such actions relate to the work of Smith-DiJulio *et al.* (2010) whose midlife women experienced a guilt-ridden conflict between adhering to traditional social roles of being a wife and a mother, and a perception that they were being held accountable to improve their own health. Furthermore, even when engaged in exercise, they often felt they were not doing enough. For our subjects then, feelings of self-reproach extended to leaving work early to participate in the offered exercise programme, to feeling guilty if they did not go. Such sensations of unease, allied to a culture of social comparison and 'more competent colleagues' (cf. Scott 2005, Anderson *et al.* 2006), located within a perceived competitive, performance-orientated workplace (Nezlek *et al.* 2007), no doubt made it difficult for the employees to immerse themselves sincerely (Goffman 1959) in an exercise related role performance. Instead they were kept in a liminal state (Turner 1967) between work and exercise identities, being aware of both yet unable to reconcile them, nor to embrace either one completely. In addition, the apparent tension related to guilt and social comparison also created a barrier for the participants to exercise thus increasing the difficulty of developing a sincere and consistent exercise identity

(Schwarzer 2008). It is to a discussion of how individual agents negotiated, resisted and coped with such obstacles that we now turn.

Justifying participation in terms of injury prevention or rehabilitation

As discussed above, although the participants within the study appreciated the idea of being able or allowed to exercise during working hours, making sense of spending 'professional' time on a seemingly personal matter was problematic for them. In this respect, the participants' experienced considerable role conflict, whereby a desired (and officially encouraged) exercise identity seemed to clash with a more legitimately dominant contextual work identity (Stryker 1980). Consequently, they were reluctant to conceptualize their exercise participation solely within a recreational health perspective. Alternatively, many of the respondents framed their participation in the exercise groups in terms of a need for injury rehabilitation or prevention. Examples from the logbooks clearly highlighted this tendency;

> The reason behind [my participation] is short and sweet, minor injuries. Time and again I have a troublesome back, a knee that some years ago was the reason I had to give my running shoes an early retirement . . . the exercise programme strength class suites me just fine, because I can adjust the intensity according to my everyday physical fitness (Scott logbook entry, spring 2010).

> I don't actually have any problems, although I know it can`t be good for the body to be sitting in front of the computer all day. Sometimes, I can feel my neck getting tired and I say to myself it is important that I prioritize the exercise group. I know my boss is very

positive that we do exercise . . . she is very concerned with our wellbeing, like, if we need

a new chair or more comfortable lighting (Emma interview, autumn 2009).

Negotiating and making sense of their exercise participation within a preventive and/or

rehabilitative needs discourse, reduced the feelings of self-reproach for the participants

and facilitated their attendance as members of their exercise groups. Consequently, the

employees' participation was clearly framed within a preventive and rehabilitative

perspective to justify taking time off work to engage in something traditionally perceived

as leisure. It was a strategy which echoes the findings of Lyman and Scott (1989), who

positioned such justifications as accounts where "one accepts responsibility for the act in

question, but denies the pejorative quality associated with it" (p. 113). Furthermore, like

the subjects in the current study, the women in Dixon's (2009) work tended to justify

their exercise participation in terms of something more than 'just being good for me';

they linked it to an aspect that facilitated their work performance. Here, evidence of a

dominant worker identity came to the fore. Similarly, through rationalizing their exercise

adherence in this way, the participants within this study allayed any guilt-ridden feelings

associated with it. Such a justification can also be somewhat explained by notions of

'motive talk' and 'vocabularies of motive' (Mills 1959). Here, people account for their

perceived deviant behaviour (i.e., time away during traditional work hours) by referring

to shared norms and values (acceptance of injury prevention), thus demonstrating to the

audience that they are both conformists and reliable.

Enhancing professional productivity through exercise

Those respondents who did not frame their involvement in a rehabilitative/preventative

perspective (or did so to a lesser extent) tended to take a more instrumental approach

when negotiating and rationalizing their participation in the programme; that is, they perceived themselves as being better equipped for working as a result of it. For example;

> Usually, the exercise provides extra energy. So I go because it means that I can keep on working until 6-7p.m. without getting tired. I might have been forced to leave the office at 5 if I had not exercised. So, I feel this is not a waste of time at all (Ben interview, spring 2010).

> If I will be working late one day, I think it's more important to exercise with the group, because I work a lot better throughout the evening then (Jane logbook, autumn 2009).

Even though research has consistently demonstrated that work-place exercise programmes have struggled to significantly improve company productivity (Davey *et al.* 2009, Marshall 2004), these employees made sense of their participation in such a programme from an instrumental perspective related to better work place production. Hence, a negotiation towards a guilt-free exercise hour was found in the argument of working harder or longer. Although going against the general research grain, the findings resonate with those of Hardcastle and Taylor (2005) who found that older women justified their participation in a leisure exercise group in terms of how it gave them increased energy to do household and family chores. The present study expands on such findings from leisure research into the work context. The subjects here then, resolved their socially perceived conflict about exercising during work hours and the guilt associated with it by arguing they would more than make up for the time 'lost' through

enhanced work effort. In this way, the act of exercising was perceived as a 'job', or a part

of 'the job', which was worth doing (for the company) in the work context.

Constructing a worker- exercise identity

The interpretation of undertaking the exercise on offer as 'doing a job within the job'

manifested itself in two ways. First, employees attempted to make the decision to

participate resemble a normal work task. In doing so, they moved away from perceiving

the exercise as indulging in personal matters, towards something they were committed to

do as part of their work schedule. Second, the employees tried to make the actual

execution of exercises as serious and 'work- like' as possible. This allowed them to adopt

a `worker-exercise` identity, where the pursuit of regular and guilt free exercise

attendance was the goal. The following data excerpts illustrate how employees tried to

locate the decision to exercise as a part of their assigned work, by making a note of

sessions to attend in the company's common appointment calendar;

> I have written it down in my calendar, but I don't write the real reason for everybody to
>
> see, like "exercise group", instead I just mark the time as busy, you know. So, I am trying
>
> to keep this time free of meetings if I can (Laura interview, autumn 2009).

> One of the participants marks her attendance next to her name on the attendance sheet
>
> hanging on the door. As she is leaving the exercise room, she turns to me and says; "I
>
> could not participate last week as I was dragged away to a meeting, but now I have
>
> actually put down this time [exercise group] as occupied in my calendar, so . . ." (field
>
> notes, spring 2010).

Although marking the time for exercise on the calendar was initially a good idea for the respondents, it also brought up new perceptual difficulties. This was particularly so in relation to a perception of being 'caught' doing something they should not when asked for a meeting at that time. A feeling of guilt then remained in terms of not prioritizing their 'real' work. Some of the tensions here in terms of identity construction are also mirrored in the psychologically orientated literature. In this respect, although such an instrumental attitude has been found less robust than an intrinsic one to maintain exercise adherence, this is countered by the benefits of planning which leads to improved attendance, investment and subsequent identity creation (Schwarzer 2008). Additionally, this tension related to `getting caught`, often led to a revision of their decision to participate in the exercise group that week, or, to an even more serious and instrumental engagement with the exercise in question approaching it as they would a work task.

> ….it strikes me as strange the total lack of atmosphere between the participants in this exercise class. It all feels a bit serious (Alison logbook entry, autumn 2009).

> The participants almost never talk to each other during the exercise class. They hardly look at each other while passing or leaving the exercise equipment to the next participant. I've even started to look at the clock, only 20 minutes into the class. I started counting how many exercise stations were left until we were done. Even though I love exercise, it felt like I was conducting a necessary and repetitive work task (field notes, autumn 2009).

> When I first do an exercise, I like to concentrate and do the exercises as effectively as possible (Adriana interview, spring 2010).

The respondents thus, appeared to be adding exercise to their work identity. They did so by constructing a `worker- exercise` identity through adopting a work-like mentality towards their exercise participation. This, to a degree, mirrors the process which Johnston and Swanson (2006, 2007) reported in women who constructed a work-mother identity to allay competing tensions between intensive mothering and career success. Whereas the competing pulls between motherhood and upholding a work-related identity left these mothers to modify either their motherhood or worker role expectations, the employees in this study managed to somewhat resolve the socially perceived conflict between work role expectations and exercise participation by modifying the former to include the latter. In doing so, the aforementioned barriers and challenges related to social comparison and stigmatization in particular were somewhat overcome.

Conclusion

Developing healthier workforces has increasingly become a driving concern for companies, as witnessed through the recent growth of official employer-sponsored exercise programmes. The development and establishment of better worker engagement in such programmes, however, are complex processes, tied to notions of identity, competence and role expectations (Johnston and Swanson 2007). Consequently, just 'stepping away from the computer and into the sweats' is far from being an unproblematic activity for most workers.

Echoing such a perspective, even notwithstanding the current organization's long record of developing sporting and leisure activities for its workforce, the employees in

this study still experienced many barriers to partaking in exercise within an officially

sanctioned programme. These related to a competitive culture of social comparison, a

trepidation of more 'competent colleagues', guilt about engaging in a less-serious activity

during work hours, and a general fear that that their perceived lack of competence as an

exerciser would influence others' professional opinion of them. A variety of

justifications were deliberately used to overcome these barriers and facilitate

participation. Here, exercise was couched in a discourse of injury prevention and/or

rehabilitation, and that of taking time off work to exercise could be more than made up

through the subsequent benefits of being able to work longer and harder. Furthermore, in

an effort to ease the ever-present risk of guilt, the employees aimed at constructing a

`worker- exercise` identity. Such an identity permitted the employees to more

legitimately regard exercise participation as part of their work duties, allowing them to

use similar role expectations to that developed and used within their more traditional

worker roles.

Far from claiming that a developed 'worker-exerciser' identity is a 'solution', the

findings here build on the earlier work of Scott (2005) and Swan (2009) in further

problematizing the nuances and complexities inherent in developing exercise identities in

the work place. Such problematizing stretches into better appreciating that providing

opportunities to exercise is not enough to secure adherence; neither is the taken-for-

granted assumption that collegial social support is always functional. Rather, the results

point to the importance of recognising exercise participation (particularly in work place

settings) as a complex relational activity, contingent upon many factors. These include

individual and group perceptions, a constant consideration of impression management,

and a variety of self-persuasive justifications for engaging in a somewhat 'guilty' pastime.

In presenting our findings, we are mindful of what can be claimed by a single case-study, (Smith- DiJulio *et al.* 2010). Nevertheless, we believe that a greater focus on the social barriers experienced and how they are negotiated by workers in relation to participating in officially sponsored exercise programmes exists as a rich area for further study. This is particularly so in terms of identity creation and maintenance. Such work is needed to better understand exercise uptake within such programmes, and how problems are perceived, engaged with and managed.

References

Anderson, C., Srivastava, S., Beer, J.S., Spataro, S.E. and Chatman, J.A., 2006. Knowing your place: self-perceptions of status in face-to-face groups. *Journal of personality and social psychology,* 91 (6), 1094-110.

Atkinson, P. & Delamont, S., 2006. *Narrative methods.* London [etc.]: SAGE.

Atlantis, E., Chow, C.M., Kirby, A. and Singh, M.F., 2004. An effective exercise-based intervention for improving mental health and quality of life measures: a randomized controlled trial. *Preventive medicine,* 39 (2), 424-34.

Berger, P.L. and Luckmann, T., 1966. *The social construction of reality. A treatise in the sociology of knowledge.* London: Penguin Books.

Charmaz, K., 2006. *Constructing grounded theory. A practical guide through qualitative analysis.* London: Sage Publications.

Davey, J., Fitzpatrick, M., Garland, R. and Kilgour, M., 2009. Adult participation motives: Empirical evidence from a workplace exercise program. *European sport managment quarterly*, 9 (2), 141-162.

Dey, I., 1999. *Grounding grounded theory*. San Diego, CA.: Academic Press

Dionigi, R., 2002. Leisure and identity management in later life: understanding competitive sport participation among older adults. *World leisure journal,* 44 (3), 4-15.

Dixon, M.A., 2009. From their perspective: a qualitative examination of physical activity and sport programming for working mothers. *Sport management review,* 12 (1), 34-48.

Esterberg, K.G., 2002. *Qualitative methods in social research.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

Festinger, L., 1954. A theory of social comparison processes. *Human Relations*, 7 (2), 117-140.

Fletcher, G.M., Behrens, T.K. and Domina, L., 2008. Barriers and enabling factors for work-site physical activity programs: a qualitative examination. *Journal of physical activity & health,* 5 (3), 418-429.

Fox, K., 1997. *The physical self: from motivation to well Being.* Champaign, IL: Human Kinetics.

Gammage, K., Ginnis, K.A.M. and Hall, C.R., 2004. Self-presentational efficacy: Its influence on social anxiety in an exercise context. *Journal of Sport & Exercise Psychology,* 26 (2), 179-190.

Geertz, C., 1973. Thick descriptions: Towards an interpretive theory of culture. In C.Geertz (Ed.), *The interpretation of cultures* (pp. 3-30). New York, NY: Basic Books.

Global advocacy for physical activity. The Toronto charter for physical activity: A global call for action, final version 20th may 2010. GAPA is an advocacy council of the International Society for Physical Activity and Health (ISPAH).

Goffman, E., 1959. *The presentation of self in everyday life.* New York: Doubleday.

-----., 1963. *Stigma: notes on the management of spoiled identity.* Harmondsworth:

Penguin.

-----., 1967. *Interaction ritual: essays in face- to- face behaviour.* Chicago: Aldine.

Guba, E.G., 1981. Criteria for assessing the trustworthiness of naturalistic inquiries.

Educational communication and technology journal, 29 (2), 75-91.

Guba, E.G. and Lincoln, Y.S., 1989. *Fourth generation evaluation.* Thousand Oaks, CA:

Sage Publications.

Guest, G., Bunce, A. and Johnson, L., 2006. How many interviews are enough? An

experiment with data saturation and variability. *Field Methods*, 18 (1), 59-82.

Hardcastle, S. & Taylor, A.H., 2005. Finding an exercise identity in an older body: "It's
redefining yourself and working out who you are". *Psychology of Sport and
Exercise, 6,* 173-188.

Hennink, M., Hutter, I., and Bailey, A., 2010. *Qualitative Research Methods*. SAGE
Publications.

Hymel, P.A., Loeppke, R.R., Baase, C.M., Burton, W.N., Hartenbaum, N.P., Hudson,

T.W., McLellan, R.K., Mueller, K.L., Roberts, M.A., Yarborough, C.M., Konicki,

D.L. and Larson, P.W., 2011. Workplace health protection and promotion: a new

pathway for a healthier and safer workforce. *Journal of occupational and*

environmental medicine, 53 (6), 695-702.

Johnston, D.D. and Swanson, D.H., 2006. Constructing the "good mother": the

experience of mothering ideologies by work status. *Sex Roles*, 54 (7/8), 509-519.

-----, 2007. Cognitive acrobatics in the construction of worker-mother identity. *Sex Roles,*

57 (5), 447-59.

Kuzel, A., 1992. Sampling in qualitative inquiry. In B. Crabtree and W. Miller, (eds.),

Doing qualitative research (pp.31–44). Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

Kvale, S. and Brinkmann, S., 2009. *Interviews: learning the craft of qualitative research*

interviewing. London: Sage.

Lincoln, Y.S. and Guba, E.G., 1985. *Naturalistic inquiry.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

Publications.

Lyman, S.M. and Scott, M.B., 1989. *A sociology of the absurd.* (2 ed.) General Hall,

INC, New York.

Marshall, A.L., 2004. Challenges and opportunities for promoting physical activity in the

workplace. *Journal of sports science and medicine,* 7 (1), 60-66.

McCall, G.J., and Simmons, J.L., 1978. *Identities and interactions*. New York: Free

Press.

McGannon, K.R. and Spence, J.C., 2010. Speaking of the self and understanding physical

activity participation: What discursive psychology can tell us about an old

problem. *Qualitative Research in Health and Sport,* 2 (1), 17-38.

Mead, G.H. (1934). *Mind, self, and society: from the standpoint of a social behaviorist.*

Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Nezlek, J.B., Schutz, A. and Sellin, I., 2007. Self-presentational success in daily social interaction. *Self and Identity,* 6 (4), 361-379.

Patton, M.Q., 2002. *Qualitative research and evaluation Methods.* London: Sage Publications.

Pedersen, M.T.P., Blangsted, A.K.P., Andersen, L.L.P., Jorgensen, M.B.M., Hansen, E.A.P. and Sjogaard, G., 2009. The effect of worksite physical activity intervention on physical capacity, health, and productivity: a 1-year randomized controlled trial. *Journal of occupational & environmental medicine,* 51 (7), 759-70.

Prudy, L. & Jones, R., 2011. Choppy waters: Elite rowers` perceptions of coaching. *Sociology of Sport Journal,* 28 (3), 329-346.

Riessman, C.K., 2008. *Narrative Methods for the Human Sciences*. Thousand Oaks, CA: *SAGE* Publications.

Robroek, S.J.W., Bredt, F.J. and Burdorf, A., 2007. The (cost-) effectiveness of an individually tailored long-term worksite health promotion programme on physical activity and nutrition: design of a pragmatic cluster randomised controlled trial." *BMC Public Health,* 7 (1), 259- 270.

Robroek, S.J., van Lenthe, F.J., van Empelen, P. and Burdorf, A., 2009. Determinants of participation in worksite health promotion programmes: a systematic review. *International journal of behavioural nutrition and physical Activity,* 6 (1), 26- 38.

Schwarzer, R. (2008). Modeling health behavior change: How to predict and modify the

    adoption and maintenance of health behaviors. *Applied Psychology: An*

    International Review, 57 (1), 1-29.

Scott, S., 2004. The shell, the stranger and the competent other. *Sociology,* 38 (1), 121-

    37.

-----., 2005. The red, shaking fool: dramaturgical dilemmas in shyness. *Symbolic*

    Interaction, 28 (1), 91-110.

-----., 2007. *Shyness and society: The illusion of competence*. London: Palgrave

Shenton, A.K., 2004. Strategies for ensuring trustworthiness in qualitative research

    project. *Education for Information*, 22 (2), 63-75.

Smith, B. and Sparkes, A.C., 2009. Narrative analysis and sport and exercise psychology:
Understanding lives in diverse ways. *Psychology of Sport and Exercise,* 10, 279-
288.

Sparkes, A.C. and Smith, B., 2002. Sport, Spinal Cord Injury, Embodied Masculinities,

    and the Dilemmas of Narrative Identity. *Men and Masculinitie*s, 4, 258-285.

Smith-DiJulio, K., Windsor, C., and Anderson, D., 2010. The shaping of midlife womens

    views of health and health behaviours. *Qualitative Health Research*, 20 (7), 966-

    76.

Stake, R.E., 1995. *The art of case study research.* Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage

    Publications.

Strachan, S.M., Brawley, L.R., Spink, K. and Glazebrook, K., 2010. Older adults'

physically-active identity: relationships between social cognitions, physical

activity and satisfaction with life. *Psychology of Sport & Exercise,* 11 (2), 114-21.

Strachan, S.M., Brawley, L.R., Spink, K.S., and Jung, M.E., 2009. Strength of Exercise

Identity and Identity-Exercise Consistency. *Journal of Health Psychology,* 14,

1196-1206.

Strauss, A. and Corbin, J., 1998. *Basics of qualitative research: Techniques and

procedures for developing grounded theory*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Stryker, S., 1980. *Symbolic interactionism: A structural version.* Menlo Park, CA:

Benjamin/Cummings.

Stryker, S., 2002. *Symbolic interactionism: A social structural version*. Caldwell, NJ:

Blackburn.

Stryker, S. and Burke P.J., 2000. The past, present, and future of an identity theory.

Social Psychology Quarterly, 63 (4), 284-297.

Swann, W.B., Johnson, R.E. and Bosson, J.K., 2009. Identity negotiation at work.

Research in organizational behaviour, 29 (6), 81-109.

Thompson, S.E., Smith, B.A., P. and Bybee, R.F.P., 2005. Factors influencing

participation in worksite wellness programs among minority and underserved

populations. *Family & community health promoting health in the workplace,* 28

(3), 267-73.

Vlachopoulos, S.P., Kaperoni. M. and Moustaka, F.C., 2011. The relationship of self-determination theory variables to exercise identity. *Psychology of sport and exercise,* 12 (3), 265-72.

Vrazel, J., Saunders, R.P., and Wilcox, S., 2008. An Overview and Proposed Framework of Social-Environmental Influences on the Physical-Activity Behavior of Women. *American Journal of Health Promotion,* 23, 2-12.

Wells, K., 2011. *Narrative Inquiry.* New York, NY: Oxford University Press.

Yin, R.K., 1984. *Case study research: design and methods.* Vol. 5. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Ziegler, J., 1997. The worker`s health: whose business is it. *Business and Health,* 15, 26-30.